

Bridging the Gap With Nicaragua

By Bill Richardson

WASHINGTON — On the face of it, the prospect that we will soon see a democratic Nicaragua working in diplomatic harmony with the United States seems remote. On Oct. 15, the Sandinistas announced severe restrictions on civil rights. This action, surely ill-timed and ill-conceived, also underscored the bankruptcy of our own policies in the region. The gap between the two governments could not be wider. It's time we thought of some new ways to bridge it.

My first reaction to the curbing of civil liberties in Nicaragua was to head to the House floor and congratulate myself. Last summer, I was one of the Congressmen who switched votes to support the Administration's request for aid to the contras, who oppose the Sandanista regime. With others, I fought successfully to make sure the aid would be used for humanitarian, not military, purposes. Even so, my switch disappointed my constituents, my colleagues, even my wife and sister.

Despite what some may think, issues do not disappear from the minds of Congressmen the moment a vote has been taken, and I have since been plagued by second thoughts. The Sandinistas' recent actions should have made me feel better, but they didn't. What saved me from a fit of self-righteousness was the knowledge that President Reagan has not stuck to his part of the bargain. The situation in Central America is getting worse day by day.

What I had hoped to do with my vote was signal the Sandinistas that they must take the peace process seriously. I wanted them to know that progressive democrats like myself were eager for them to mend their undemocratic ways. And I had been disturbed by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega Saavedra's trek to Moscow immediately after an earlier House vote denying aid to the contras — especially since his representatives had assured me that the House vote would produce a Sandinista ceasefire. So I voted for humanitarian aid to the contras in the hope that it would improve behavior on both sides.

These hopes have not been realized. Not only have the Sandinistas restricted civil liberties but also there have been reports of new Soviet arms shipments to Nicaragua through Cuba. Meanwhile, despite assurances

to the contrary, reports persist that the Reagan Administration continues to manage the war and raise money for the contras through private channels.

Where do we go from here? Above all, I believe we need some new initiatives — and not just the usual "let's give a chance to Contadora" rhetoric. We need to face the fact that the peace initiative by Venezuela, Panama, Colombia and Mexico is dying because the Administration and the Sandinistas, for their own reasons, do not want it to succeed.

We should reopen talks with the Sandinistas through bilateral channels. We should also seek, through the

The U.S.'s policies need revision too

Organization of American States, nonaggression pacts with each country in the area as well as verifiable regional agreements on nonintervention. We have nothing to lose; perhaps the Sandinistas are now ready to deal. Mr. Ortega surely must recognize that Nicaragua is growing more and more isolated and that the contras are growing stronger.

Strict conditions must be attached to all aid to the contras. Unless the contras get rid of their ex-Somocista leaders, stop their human rights abuses and develop a democratic agenda, they should lose our support. We should also provide humanitarian aid, mainly food and medicine, to the Nicaraguan people through churches and private voluntary organizations. We must work on developing positive relations with the people of Nicaragua who see us as gringo invaders.

Finally, to breathe some fresh air into the peace process, I would send a top-level negotiator to the area, someone of the stature of Henry A. Kissinger, Sol M. Linowitz or Jimmy Carter, whose human rights policies are admired throughout the hemisphere. The Administration must now be convinced that arming the contras, directly or indirectly, is not the answer, and that actively promoting a peace process is more critical. Our policy in Nicaragua has contributed to the problem. It is time to admit that we must be an active part of the solution. □

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